Uniqueness and Family Resemblances in Generic Fascism

Roger Griffin
Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom

1. Was Fascism a Synchronic-Epochal or a Generic-Diachronic Phenomenon?

I have always considered the synchronic-epochal and generic-diachronic approaches as existing in a dialectical relationship rather than being mutually exclusive. In fact, one of the premises of my research (still hotly contested by many scholars) is to reject the assumption that fascism assumed its sole historically significant expression in the inter-war period when it acquired a number of features with which it is still widely identified in the public imagination (e.g. leader-cult, uniforms, paramilitarism, expansionist imperial policy, pervasive propaganda, cultural vandalism). Such an approach still dominates many encyclopaedia-style definitions and leads to a ‘check-list’ definition of fascism based on an amalgam of properties displayed by Fascism and Nazism.

Residues of this naïve approaches still linger in my original definition presented in The Nature of Fascism (1991) when I talk of the fascist belief in an imminent transformation of the status quo—something that does not apply to more sophisticated fascist historical scenarios since 1945, e.g. ones based on the visions of Armin Mohler (1950) and Julius Evola (1953). These are based on seeing the present as an interregnum, meaning that the breakthrough to a new era is indefinitely postponed. They are present in even more blatant forms in the definitions of such fascistologists as Stanley Payne, Michael Mann, A. James Gregor, and Ernst Nolte when such attributes as the leader-cult, corporatism, or a state-terror apparatus are treated as definitional properties. When the interwar period is seen as providing the ‘true’ manifestations of fascism, post-war fascism is regarded as a sort of ‘coda’ of minimal relevance to understanding the genus. My approach stresses instead the need to track
fascism’s evolution as a genus, its adaptation to different local historical conditions and its ability to mutate into new forms (e.g. cyberfascism or the New Right) outwardly different from Nazism or Fascism while retaining its core myth of national/ethnic rebirth (which must be treated as an ideal-typically identified ideological core and NOT an essence).

In short, my premise is that fascism can be usefully seen in its first inter-war stage of development as a new ideological force characterized by a revolutionary version of organic, populist nationalism (‘palingenetic ultra-nationalism’). This certainly assumed its first significant organizational form as a factor in national politics and society in Mussolini’s movement from where the term earned its generic name. However, in my view, to treat Fascism as the ‘real-type’ of fascism from which others derived, as proposed by Wolfgang Wippermann (see Loh, Wippermann 2002; Wippermann, 2009), is ill-conceived. In contrast to Nolte (1963), I argue that the inter-war period was a ‘fascist era’ only in the sense that it was then that forms of revolutionary nationalism emerged in many countries—predominantly but not exclusively in Europe—as a radical alternative to what was conceived as a dying liberal capitalism, to reactionary ultra-conservatism, and to a profoundly threatening communism. In my ‘narrative’ fascism assumed two profoundly different regime forms that partially compromised the original ideals of the movement in Italy and Germany, and had a decisive impact on government in several other countries, including Hungary and Romania, and was imitated by a number of conservative military regimes. However, the totalitarian form it assumed till 1945 was a product of an age shaped by World War I, the collapse of absolutist empires and the Russian Revolution of 1917. The core ideology, which I must stress again is an ideal-typical construct and not an ‘essence’, has since assumed a number of ideological and organizational expressions which diverge significantly from interwar models.

I consider the real essentialists those historians whose work implies in practice (whatever their theoretical convictions) that Nazism represents the ‘essence’ of fascism, and who fail to recognize the profound and empirically demonstrable continuity and kinship of inter-war variants of fascism with such phenomena as White Noise music, International Third Position, and acts of lone-wolf terrorism carried out against multi-culturalism or the ‘One World’ society with no trace of leader-cult or coloured shirts. The approach I have adopted in the last 25 years (though far more restrictive in its definition than the one promoted by Stein Larsen in his Fascism outside Europe, 2001) also makes it natural to look for fascism and phenomena akin to fascism both outside Europe and outside the inter-war period. However, it assumes that